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The Discourses of Participation and Accountability in the International Context at the End of the Twentieth Century¹

1. Introduction

The recent crisis of legitimacy experienced in several Latin American democratic countries reflects a transformation of politics (Lechner 1998) that is the result of the new historical context in which social action takes place in the region. First of all, it is necessary to recognize the complex phenomenon of the “decentering of the State”: the reduction of the role of the State in the economy and in public life in general. Of course, this process is relative, and varies from country to country, but it is certain that the spaces the State left vacant are occupied both by the market and by uncivil social actors (interest groups with the ability to control economic, social and political spaces), as the extreme case of Colombia demonstrates. The process affects many countries. It involves a relative separation of the logics of the economic, political, social, cultural and legal subsystems. This differentiation is, in the international sphere, a product of globalization and neoliberalism and in national spaces, of the maturity and specialization of markets and of the debilitation of corporativism and of the State intervention in the economy. This separation has also resulted in the fragmentation of the spaces of social action, both public and private.

1 This text is based on research supported by the Ford Foundation by means of the project “Programa de Investigación Comparativa y de Formación sobre la Sociedad Civil y los Espacios Públicos en América Latina y de Profundización de una Agenda de Investigación sobre la Sociedad Civil en México”. In addition, a number of the ideas presented here are the result of numerous debates with my colleagues Evelina Dagnino and Aldo Panfichi, so the focus, central arguments and some of the conclusions should be considered the result of collective work. Nevertheless I have sole responsibility for any deficiencies the reader may find in this chapter.

Certainly, the social, cultural and moral plurality of society has increased at an unprecedented pace, in such a way that multiple identities are emerging. This greater social pluralization may be accompanied by a relative strengthening of certain sectors of civil society, since the new context implies the weakening of certain authoritarian social relations and the unfolding of processes of secularization, detraditionalization and recognition of differences that give space to new types of civil associationism.² Nevertheless, civil society develops unequally, with the organization of popular sectors experiencing an increasing weakness. In the political sphere, the consequence of this situation is what Lechner calls the “decentering and informalization” of politics itself. This means that politics as a space for the constitution of the state and of the economy, that is to say, as the producer of order, is fading and turning into a subsystem that is increasingly self-referring, incapable of recognizing and expressing at its core the enormous diversity of the emerging social, cultural and political options. In addition, the old ties between social groups, parties and governments no longer exist, given the fluidity and multiplicity of the groups, the nomadic character of identities and the short-term strategies of the parties. Politics is also becoming increasingly informal, that is to say, it operates outside the institutional realm.

Paradoxically, it is in this context that discourses, projects and practices are emerging that propose a greater participation of society in public life, as well as new projects for the emancipation of society that address the political and economic subjection provoked by an unjust economic system and a political system increasingly closed within itself.³ These aspirations and practices lack an integral and common project. We are living in a time of searching for new ideas and concepts. In recent years, actors as heterogeneous as international financial agencies, NGO's that work on a global scale, Latin American governments, international foundations and a large variety of social actors are building a surprisingly common language that hides a plurality of meanings and projects. This is the case of the concepts of civil society, citizen participation, social capital and others. The

2 I would like to thank Sérgio Costa for having me take note of this process. See Costa (2002); Olvera (2003).

3 About the idea of emancipation, see Santos (2000).

different uses of these words establish a wide variety of symbolic and conceptual relations with the rights of citizenship and create multiple imaginaries about the character of public life.

In this chapter I take a first look at a type of political project,⁴ the one that emanates from the multilateral development agencies such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and some global NGOs, which has been adopted, at least in discourse, by most Latin American governments. This project is the most visible face of the discursive globalization we are experiencing today (Mato 2004). It does not involve a coherent set of principles and programs, but the co-existence of very diverse ideas and theories that in their contradictory unity constitute a good example of the reigning confusion.

The chapter will present the diversity, heterogeneity and juxtaposition of the discourses that lie at the very heart of the complex and diverse international political society, albeit only the main subjects will be addressed. It also includes some brief final considerations that analyze the connections between projects of international institutions, national governments and social actors.

2. Programs of International Agencies and Governments for Civil Society and Participation in Latin America

The historical process we are analyzing is situated within the framework of the surprising historic coincidence of two opposing processes. On one hand, the last decades of the twentieth century were marked by the “Third Wave of Democratization” (Huntington 1991), including the fall of communism and the adoption of democratic institutions and markets in most Eastern European countries, while in the eighties the same process had taken place in Latin America. Certainly, the spread throughout the world of formal democratic institutions does not imply an authentic adoption of democratic cultures and practices nor the democratization of social relations (Avritzer/Santos 2002). To the contrary, we experience a sort of “depletion” of democracy that weak-

4 The concept of political project, used with many meanings in the sociological literature, has been redefined by Evelina Dagnino (2004) as a heuristic tool that allows the analysis of the meaning of political action, of the collective imaginary and of the normative expectations that guide the political process of the actors.

ens social rights, increases social inequality and limits the political game to a mere struggle for positions between political parties that are increasingly distanced from the citizens (Oxhorn 2006). On the other hand, this same historical period has been the time in which the most recent phase of globalization developed, under the political protection of the “Washington Consensus”⁵ a sort of international political accord concerning the “desirability” and “inevitability” of globalization. This process was promoted by means of relatively open markets, that is, the breaking of barriers to trade and investment, coupled with the reduction or complete elimination of most national regulations and in nearly all types of markets.

Both new and old democracies had to execute, whether by conviction or by need, the economic liberalization program. At the beginning of the process, the turn to neoliberal policies enjoyed legitimacy. It was a political decision that appeared to be a plausible means to get rid of the corrupt and inefficient state companies and of inter-elite agreements and pacts that allowed the reproduction of populist and dictatorial regimes. The “external factor” was seen as a modernizing element, a way to break with deeply rooted interests that impeded the economic development of most countries. This at least was the view of conservative technocrats and politicians, international development agencies and educated national elites.⁶ In addition, under this light, democracy was seen by these same actors as a means to create some sort of citizen control over corrupt bureaucracies capable of appropriating State revenues. This understanding of change during this period helped to legitimate the private sector, particularly in those countries with a “statist” or Socialist past. International development organizations such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund and various U.N. agencies promoted this process with determination.

5 If the Washington Consensus originally supposed a global accord in the simultaneous desirability of development and democracy at the world level, in practice, the emphasis on the market as the cornerstone of the project ended up making the “Consensus” a program that promoted economic liberalization, without real interest in democracy. See Drache (2001).

6 A paradigmatic case is that of Mexico, where President Carlos Salinas de Gortari came to enjoy enormous popularity by waving the flag of modernization and integration with the world. See Olvera (2003, chap. 1).

The State was no longer seen as the central actor of the economy, and interestingly this lack of centrality was extended to the field of social regulation as well. In contrast to the omnipresent and inclusive concept of the populist State – which in one variation or another had been dominant in the most important countries of Latin America in the post World War II period (with the exceptions of Colombia, Paraguay, Uruguay and the Central American countries)⁷ – a new principle is created: society itself has a capacity of self-organization and management that allows it to establish a relationship of “joint responsibility” with the State in the design and execution of public policies. This “decentering” of the State pointed to the heart of the hegemonic forms of state legitimacy until the mid 1980’s in Latin America (Haggard/Kaufman 1995).

Meanwhile, another form of globalization developed: the growing internationalization of certain segments of civil society such as human rights groups and the ecologist, pacifist and feminist movements, whose struggles created a previously non-existing front of civil pressure against some international agencies (Fox/Brown 2000; Mato 2004). From this dynamic emerged, since the end of the 1980’s, a symbolic revaluation of civil society, which closely followed the recovery of this concept that various social actors had promoted in the 1970’s and 1980’s, particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Cohen/Arato 1992).

The concept of civil society became a substantive element of the lexicon of the international development agencies, national governments and international foundations, but with a specific meaning: the participation of citizens’ organizations in public affairs as a way of forcing the government to be more efficient (Tussie 2000). Here the idea of civil society is limited to a network of associations whose objectives, object of action and form of constitution have no analytic relevance, insofar as they are only valued for their potential for cooperation with the government in the implementation of public policies. The heterogeneity of the sector was plainly ignored. For this reason international financial agencies tended to equate the idea of civil society with the non-governmental organizations (Mato 2004), not

7 See Larraín (2004) and Malloy (1987).

recognizing the fact that civil society is much more complex and heterogeneous than NGOs (Olvera 2003).

By the end of the 1990's, the debate about the democratic potential of civil society in Latin America seemed over. The surprising consensus shared by political parties, governments, multilateral development agencies and most civil actors was the result of a hegemonic vision that attributed considerable value to the contributions of civil society to democracy. Nevertheless, behind the apparent unity of concepts and proposals a diversity of projects and a weak idea of civil society were hidden. Civil society was reduced to an amorphous "Third Sector" understood as a set of private entities oriented to the production of public services. In this way, the critical profile that the idea of civil society carried in the 1980's and the early 1990's was discarded (Olvera 2004). The jump from a notion based on the opposition of civil society and state to an idea of full collaboration between them was surprisingly fast. This relationship became surreptitiously depoliticized.

Meanwhile, in the international public arena a language of citizen participation was simultaneously developed (Rivera 1998; Cunill 1997). Participation was understood as a type of cooperation between citizens and government in the implementation of public policies. Multiple governments around the world adopted the discourse of participation and even instituted some mechanisms that appeared to meet this claim (Hevia 2005).

Nevertheless, the historic coincidence between the neoliberal implantation and the processes of redemocratization in most of Latin America also opened space to reconsider the themes of civil society and citizen participation in a distinct manner (Calderón, Assies y Salman 2002). The analysis of transition to democracy included an evaluation of civil society as the promoter of the struggle for political rights and as a moral opponent to authoritarianisms of all types (Avritzer/Olvera 1992). The role of civil society in the transition had indeed a liberal reading, grounded on the opposition between a virtuous civil society and an evil State, but also a republican reading that stressed the participative and co-generating dimension of a new democratic power that emanated from below. The republican discourse was articulated as an explicit political project in Brazil, where the idea of participation was the platform for a program oriented to the "so-

cialization of power”, that is to say, a “sharing of power between society and the political system” (Alvarez/Dagnino/Escobar 1998). In this case the notion of participation pointed out to a type of political co-management, whose moral and legal principles were molded into the Constitution of 1988. This legal framework allowed the unfolding of innovative experiments such as the management councils (Dagnino 2002), participative budgets (Avritzer 2002b) and other forums and institutionalized public spaces.

The participative project is also present, to a lesser degree and with less ambition, in the Colombian constitution of 1991, and with much greater rigor and clarity in the Venezuelan Constitution of 1999. It should be noted that the Peruvian Constitution of 1993 also contains this class of precepts, as does, in a certain form, the Bolivian Constitution of 1994. Nevertheless, it should be noted that only in Brazil the participative project as co-management went all the way from the Constitution to operative institutions that now have more than ten years of experience. As shown by Hevia (2005), in other countries secondary laws were never enacted and the scarce new institutions had no capacity to promote effective citizen participation, and therefore the experiences are more ambivalent than in Brazil.

In most countries, the participative project coexists both at the constitutional level and in political practice with pluralistic and neo-corporatist devices of representation of interests that have a long tradition, some of them having roots in the corporatist regimes. For example, the history of the Economic and Social Council go back to the Vargas’ government in Brazil, but recently, under the Lula government, the Council came to adopt a pluralist and neocorporativist content, that is, a consultative and plural character, stressing the symbolic unity of diverse and conflictive political and social actors in support of a national project. In Colombia the “grand peace accord” expressed the shared aspiration of political and social actors about the need to put an end to the internal armed conflict and to extend the rule of law to the entire nation. This pluralist matrix took as well the form of “representative” councils, more or less recognized publicly, which discuss specific public policies. This model is based on the principle that the interests represented in it are organized interests, those of the

economically, socially and politically powerful social groups.⁸ Their recognition and legitimacy are based on the relative strength of each sector. Certainly, this kind of *fora* cannot, by their own nature, address moral or legal dilemmas. But the issue of representation is very easy to resolve: the stronger, more visible, more influential actors must have a place in the councils.

It is worth mentioning that there is another version of the liberal project: the citizen seen as a user of services, that is, as a client of public services. This line has been encouraged since the early 1990's by the World Bank. It is related to the introduction in Latin America of the "New Public Management" school, which insisted on the need of a State's administrative reform to make it more sensitive to citizens' demands and more efficient (Cunill 1997).⁹ The nodal principle of this school of thought is to consider public management as an extension of private management, and to force the former to function under the latter's principles. Thus, citizens come to be understood as "clients" and government as a "service provider". As a consequence, the rights of citizenship are of no concern for this school of thought. There is no talk of rights and obligations, but only a liberal-corporate vision of the functions of the State. The institutions that under this scheme are promoted in Latin America (committees of users of services, committees of beneficiaries of subsidies, etc.), are a sort of equivalent to consumer associations, thus representing the insertion of a mercantile logic in the relationships between the state and its subjects.¹⁰

Both liberal perspectives share a problem: neither is grounded on rights. Pluralist participation and the satisfaction of clients are concepts that have no legal way of enforcement. Subjects depend on the good will of the government or on the *ad-hoc* pacts between social actors and government officials. This is a theme of great political transcendence, because in the absence of rights to which citizens can

8 For a broad vision of these processes, see Haggard/Kaufman (1995); Maxfield (1990).

9 See the website of the Consejo Latinoamericano para la Administración del Desarrollo (CLAD) for the most complete presentation of these and other influences on Latin American public administration <www.clad.org.ve>.

10 The World Bank has encouraged most of these mechanisms. For a review and a summary see the bank's site <www.worldbank.org>.

appeal, the final decision about which spaces to open and to whom, falls unilaterally into the hands of government.

The neoliberal project for the participation of citizens, in its various versions, lacks a suitable legal and institutional anchor and is based explicitly on the depolitization of the relationships between the government and the citizens. The schemes of participation that emerge out of this model serve first of all the efficiency and the effectiveness of state action, guiding the interaction through a cooperative practice in which conflict is conceptual and symbolically absent.

Coherent with this approach is the use of the concept of social capital, also promoted by the World Bank, which supposedly explains the sociological substrate of the social relations of cooperation between civil actors and government.¹¹ Certainly, the concept of social capital describes the ties of mutual trust and the trajectories of knowledge that allow generalized confidence in the institutions, a reasonable expectation that the agreements reached will be complied with and that conflicts will be discarded while cooperation is established. The merit of the concept of social capital is that it concentrates on the cultural factors of social action, transcending the narrow horizons of mere institutional design. Nevertheless, the main problem with this concept is that it is not able to clarify how ties of trust can be created in political contexts in which laws are not respected, the social and cultural inequality among the actors is abysmal and the legitimacy of the state institutions is very fragile. Moreover, the theory of social capital was never able to explain how interpersonal trust can turn into trust in institutions (Offe 1999). Despite all this, the notion of social capital still informs much of the direction and objectives of public policies in Mexico¹² as well as in other countries of Latin America.

In this context emerges the new discourse of *accountability*. It is understandable that the disenchantment and frustration with limited concepts and practices of participation would give birth to strong

11 Reintroduced by Robert Putnam (1993) into the contemporary sociological discussion, the concept of social capital launched a broad international debate. For a review, see Edwards/Foley/Diani (2001); for a substantive theoretical debate see Warren (2001).

12 As of 2005, the best examples are the web sites of the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (www.sedesol.gob.mx) and of the Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Social <www.indesol.gob.mx>.

demands for real citizen control over the exercise of government. The idea of accountability literally refers to the presentation of accounts and therefore, to the transparency and disclosure of state activities. It does not involve cooperation in the definition of public policies, but requiring the government to explain its actions to the citizens. This discourse was adopted by international development agencies in order to attain the desired effectiveness of their own actions in favor of development and democracy.¹³

The accountability discourse is also a reaction of civil society actors to the continuity of generalized practices of corruption that characterize the majority of governments and the preservation of the bureaucratic secretiveness on which the discretionary power of the politicians and bureaucrats is based (Peruzzotti/Smulovitz 2002). In other words, this new discourse and practice of society is a response to the inability of governments to reform themselves, to create a professional and responsible bureaucracy, and to open their accounts to public scrutiny (Olvera/Isunza 2006). Thus, the struggle for accountability can also be understood, at least in some of its cases, as a social movement that defends the broadening of the concept of human rights as to include the rights of information and participation.

In sum, the hegemonic neoliberal discourse in Latin America has sought to depoliticize the relations between the State and civil society, to symbolically annul the existence of social conflict, to conceive of social capital as an undifferentiated cooperation between citizens and government, all without reference to the rights of citizenship. This conceptual effort is coherent with and complementary to the neoliberal project in the economic field.

The participative project developed by the Brazilian left and by certain social movements in other South American countries is grounded on the defense of rights, recognizes the existence of social conflict, postulates the need to institutionalize spaces for dialog and negotiation between society and the State and recognizes the plurality of society. Nevertheless, the two projects use the same language and the same concepts, which is precisely what Dagnino (2002), calls the

13 Once again the World Bank has given emphasis and visibility to this concept in recent years. See its website.

“perverse confluence”, a situation that has created a tremendous conceptual, political and ideological confusion

3. Final Remarks

The countries of Latin America suffer, to a greater or lesser degree, and in various forms, a crisis of legitimacy of democratic institutions and are experiencing a condition of political confusion characterized by the overlapping of political discourses and projects. If the origin of the problem there is a complex set of historic circumstances that configure a new space for politics that eliminates the centrality of the State and leads to the informalization and mediatization of the political system. It is also true that the multiplicity of voices pronouncing the same words with different meanings, both in the State and in society, contributes to the confusion, diminishes the critical capacity of civil society, makes it more difficult to distinguish the political projects in struggle and to recognize the democratic innovations with greater potential for transformation.

The contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary politics are condensed within the State. Perhaps the main contradiction, from the point of view of the relations between the State and civil society, is the “perverse confluence” (Dagnino 2002) of the neoliberal project with the initiatives for change coming both from a sector of civil society as well as from some leftist parties. In practice, this fundamental dichotomy is complicated by the multiple combinations and connections between these two projects and by the form in which the multilateral development agencies intervene in the political debate and practice in Latin America. Unique combinations of participative discourses, glorifications of civil society and convocations to co-responsibility are presented in each Nation-State.

This situation is even more complicated by the fragmentation of the State in horizontal, vertical and spatial terms. Each State agency applies distinct participative policies. Frequently, state and municipal governments understand and use participation in different manners. Thus, within a single country we can observe both notable experiences of an authentic democratization of public life as well as the worst authoritarian fictions, both supported by the same language and by the same legal and institutional foundations.

This cacophony of discourse and practice makes it difficult to clearly distinguish the nature of the projects in play and to evaluate the quality of the democratic innovation underway, the depth of the cultural transformations that are being produced and the relative strength of the trends of change that are being experienced in the region. Notable confluences of language among political and social actors are produced that follow distinct projects. Frequently, potential alliances are not created because of lack of trust and political confrontation, or to the contrary, political alliances are formed on the basis of apparently common discourses that are soon perceived to be fictitious.

The fact that Latin America is subsumed by the conditions imposed by globalization, and that the State has lost centrality in the entire region, does not eliminate spaces for democratic innovation. The great paradox of our time is that despite the context of political crisis found in some countries, a democratic imaginary has emerged that far transcends a simple electoral democracy (with greater or lesser force in each country). The discourse about rights, citizenship, participation and accountability is firmly established on the normative horizon of public life. It still needs to be translated into projects that are even more broad and shared, the bases of which already exist in concrete practices and institutions that are available in the collective experience, but that remain somewhat hidden in the reigning confusion of discourses and in the mixture of social practices that combine distinct projects and interests.

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